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## **A NETWORK AMONG ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS AND PUBLIC SPHERES**

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### **Abstract**

This study considered the capacity of nonprofit organizations to create public spheres by analyzing a network among alternative schools. The article defines “public spheres” as spheres of continuous and reflective discussion used by a plural and diverse public. This research employed ethnographic methods. The author conducted the following fieldwork: Participant observation in the network activity of alternative schools, semi-structured interviews with network actors, and document collection and review. This research analyzed the characteristics and structure of an alternative school network that maintained weak organizational ties. The network’s motto was “the network must avoid expressing a single ideology,” and its important function was instrumental. This research made the following three major findings. First, the network was comprised of weak ties, making linkages among organizations with diverse ideologies possible. Second, the network motto enabled the creation of new relationships when heterogeneous others joined. Third, the network’s instrumental function promoted reflection of an organization’s own activity and created new compromises depending on the situation. An organizational network embodies discussions that are indispensable for creating and sustaining public spheres.

Key words: alternative school, network, public sphere

### **1. Defining the issue**

The purpose of this study was to examine the possibilities of forming a network for educational non-profit organizations (NPOs) to create a civil public sphere. Specifically, this study examined

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the activities formed by an alternative school network in Japan.<sup>1)</sup>

One of the recent trends that has developed at the Japan Society for the Study of Adult and Community Education (JSSACE) regarding the collection of widespread viewpoints on public spheres is that of increased research into the educational activities conducted by NPOs. This debate depicts a larger trend; the creation of civil public spheres via communal private planning represents a critical reaction to public spheres that are institutionalized by state power.

Takahashi (2009) finds that the significance of an NPO, unlike that of the state, lies in the NPO's democratic cooperative nature, which is created through private action. Hiratsuka (2003) analyzed the transition of NPO educational activities from a cooperative to a public nature using the activities of parties overlooked by the existing public education system to identify a public issue in the field of education and bring it to society's attention. Sato (2004 p. 11) summarized the characteristics of an educational NPO thusly: "in addition to offering numerous opportunities for educational activities, the actor must also be capable of proposing alternative learning perspectives to the existing educational system, of making a certain degree of impact, and of promoting a new direction of development into a society of lifelong learning."

Previous discussions of public spheres in public education research, including the NPO research mentioned above, have adopted "a self-evident premise that the state (authorities) and the people (movements) are in diametric opposition." (Nashimoto 1993 p. 75) Regarding this research trend, Nashimoto (1993 p. 76) stated that "the act of understanding the process of creating a 'public sphere' from a communications perspective is becoming an important part of thinking about public spheres in education." Taking Nashimoto's argument one step further, Fukushima (2007) dubbed public spheres that are manifested through communication as "civil public spheres," and identified an issue regarding the activities of education-related NPOs as such: "the formation of a civil public sphere requires the presence of diverse viewpoints and the existence of a public space where a dialogue can be held with others." (p. 122) Fukushima therefore states that activities conducted through NPOs must not be treated as having the single goal of criticizing the state, but rather must be understood as a civil public sphere. That is, a process of communication between a variety of actors.

In *The Structural Formation of the Public Sphere*, Jürgen Habermas (1990) establishes civil public spheres as "realms of criticism toward government authority" outside government authority through the market. Habermas also defined the ideal civil public as a "form of reflective communication where the exercise of various forms of authority, other than the power held by superior arguments (logic), is rendered ineffective." (Saito 2000 p. 33) In this space, a consensus would be formed via a rational, logical debate among participants.

Habermas's argument has been criticized from various angles. First, it has been criticized for

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<sup>1)</sup> The term "alternative school" as used in this article refers to organizations that conduct educational activities which do not primarily pursue profits that exist outside the public school system.

its oversight of the presence of political disputes within the civil public sphere, with critics raising the issues of asymmetrical power and potential opportunities for values clashes. (Saito 200 p. 35) Fraser (1993) mentions the necessity of “theorizing that various public spheres will compete with each other and act upon one another.” (in Japanese translation p. 145) Habermas’s definition of the ideal form of the civil public sphere as a space for debate with the purpose of obtaining a consensus has also received criticism. Saito (2000 p. 35) points out that “debate produces aporia (an impasse) instead of achieving a clear consensus” and states that, in achieving consensus “in contexts where immediate collective decision-making cannot be avoided, there may be no other way forward than provisional compromise.” In debate, Saito argues that the important thing is that “a procedure is maintained where the continuity of argument (the possibility of review) is guaranteed.”

These criticisms of Habermas’s argument reveal that debating the nature of a civil public sphere captures the importance of understanding the interactions facilitated by various public spheres in addition to understanding these spheres as processes of continuous debate. This is where compromises are formed; these interactions affect existing agreements and power relationships.

The civil public sphere sought by educational NPOs may be called “a space for reflective, continuous debate conducted via many different public spheres.”

The goal of this study was to identify the possibilities of networks formed when educational NPOs created and maintained civil public spheres. This study used the specific example of the network activities formed between alternative school organizations.

Our reasons for approaching this study’s questions by examining alternative schools are as follows. Many of alternative schools in Japan function as NPOs and are to some extent removed from the traditional public education management bodies of the government, incorporated educational institutions, and the educational industry, which engages in for-profit commercial activity. Previous research (Kikuchi & Nagata 2001) has clarified that these schools engage in a variety of activities and that each school builds a variety of public spheres. It is therefore appropriate to use alternative schools in Japan as a case study for examining multiple, diverse public spheres.

Below, Section 2 presents a study overview, while Section 3 clarifies the special characteristics of the network formed between these alternative schools. Section 4 analyzes the processes of interaction facilitated by this network. Finally, Section 5 uses the obtained perspectives to consider the possibilities of these networks in helping educational NPOs create and maintain civil public spheres.

## 2. Survey overview

The example used in this study was the Free! School Ring network activity independently managed by several alternative schools in Japan's Kansai area. Free! School Ring was formally launched in February 2003. As of January 2015, the network consisted of 17 organizations, including alternative schools, free schools, democratic schools, correspondence high school support schools (hereafter “support schools”), and more. The affiliated organizations were all NPOs or volunteer organizations. This did not include incorporated educational institutions, government organizations, or for-profit organizations. The affiliates were strongly active in civic activities and civic service.

Regarding specific activities, affiliates distributed information through a newsletter and a jointly-managed homepage. They provided interaction between children and youths through activities such as sports meets and game tournaments as well as opportunities for staff interaction and research through training camps and mixers (Table 1).

Free! School Ring did not have a dedicated office. One director was chosen by each of four member organizations. These directors assumed the important task of determining the budget through unanimous agreement. A general meeting is held once a year, with additional meetings held monthly as a general rule. A rough activity plan is formed at these meetings. Information is shared by a mailing list, dedicated chat, and SNS. However, it is not mandatory for member organizations to be present at these meetings. It is therefore rare for all member organizations to attend. It is also not necessary for all directors to agree on simple coordinated activities involving interaction between children from multiple organizations. Also, while this is not a stated activity of the Free! School Ring network, it does facilitate the informal coordination of activities independently conducted by member organizations that involve cooperation with and

TABLE 1.  
Major “Free Schooling!” activities in 2014

Date Held	Theme	Location
1/15	Joint survival game	Democratic school M
4/2	Joint survival game	Democratic school M
6/6	Joint basketball practice	Municipal gym
6/16	Joint tennis practice	Municipal tennis court
8/20	Joint survival game	Democratic school M
8/25	Mah-jongg meeting	Free school F
9/21	Staff training & induction conference	Town meeting hall
10/14	Joint basketball practice	Municipal gym
11/8	Free school festival	City boys' center

(Compiled by author based on Free! School Ring mailing list records)

participation by organizations outside the network<sup>2)</sup>.

This study used data obtained via a survey conducted through ethnographic research methods. The author observed Free! School Ring meetings, events, mixers, and other activities held from June 2012 to the present as a participant or a volunteer. For the purposes of data collection, the author attended almost every monthly meeting and held from the start of the survey to November 2013 before participating in these events approximately once every three months from that point until the present. The author also participated in successive events and functions. In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 16 staff members from nine organizations that were current or former members of Free! School Ring at the time. The interview participants are listed in Table 2. Furthermore, documents such as flyers, pamphlets, and meeting records were collected. The data referenced in this study was processed in a manner that preserves privacy without losing context.

TABLE 2.  
List of interview participants

Name	Age	Org. Position	Yrs. in Pos.	Organization
Mr. O	50s	Staff	13	Alternative school R
Ms. N	50s	Representative	18	Free school L
Mr. Y	30s	Staff	13	Free school L
Ms. K	50s	Representative	18	Democratic school M
Ms. H	40s	Board of Directors Representative	15	Free school F
Mr. S	40s	Head of the Executive Office	15	Free school F
Mr. U	40s	Staff	9	Free school F
Mr. A	20s	Staff	8	Free school F
Ms. G	30s	Staff	6	Free school F
Ms. J	30s	Staff	6	Free school F
Ms. R	50s	Representative	12	Child-rearing support space Y
Mr. I	30s	Board Chairman	11	Free school N
Mr. M	30s	Board Vice Chairman	11	Free school N
Ms. F	40s	Principal	11	Alternative school O
Ms. H	30s	Representative	5	Free school V
Mr. T	30s	Representative	4	Corrspondance high school support school K

<sup>2)</sup> The target of this study's survey is the same as that of "The Process of Developing an Alternative Educational Organization Network", *JSSACE Japan-Korea Scholarship Exchange Research Seminar Presentation Collection*.

### 3. Network characteristics

Here, the characteristics of the alternative school network are clarified. This section focuses on the network structure, rules common to the network, and functions emphasized by the network in addition to examining the philosophy behind the multi-organizational network activities.

#### 3.1. *The structure of a network using weak ties*

We first clarify the structure of the alternative school network using the strength of the social ties within the network.

Mark Granovetter (1973) analyzed the strength of social ties in such networks, and defined the strength of these ties by “the amount of time, the emotional intensity, the intimacy (mutual confiding), and the reciprocal services which characterize the tie.” We analyzed the strength of the ties in the alternative school network using these four dimensions.<sup>3)</sup>

##### 3.1.1. *Allocated time*

We first discuss the amount of time members spend together. Naturally, if staff members or children and youths come from different organizations, they will spend less time together than if they belonged to the same organization. The Free! School Ring network also spans multiple prefectures, so there is far less time spent together among members of organizations that are separated by significant physical distances. As interview subject Mr. Y said, “getting people from the Osaka area and the Himeji area together every month takes a little effort, and it’s tough” (Interview with Mr. Y, 9/24/2013).

##### 3.1.2. *Emotional intensity*

We then clarify the emotional intensity of the ties based on the degree to which the fundamental principles behind network activities are shared. The stronger the emotional intensity, the stronger the principles behind the network activities are theoretically shared. On the other hand, if the emotional intensity of the ties is weak, then these principles are not considered to be shared as strongly. The alternative school NPOs are volunteer associations with unique principles driving their individual activities. Staff members and other participants from these organizations operate based on these shared principles. What about the network that spans these organizations? Ms. K, a representative of democratic school M, which is a member of the Free! School Ring network, states, “we have policies at my place, and there are some areas where we cannot compromise, but when we get together with those from the outside in particular, it’s better for the children if we get along with our compatriots, even if they’re markedly different from us” (Interview with Ms. K, 4/25/2013). Ms. K stated that the principles at her own organization would clash with those at partners connected through the network, yet they still acted in solidarity. This kind of

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<sup>3)</sup> Granovetter treats weak ties as existing primarily between individuals, but the argument advanced in this study concerns ties between organizations.

story (that is, of an interview subject's own organization working together with other organizations for network activities despite differences in values and principles) was related by almost all interview subjects. As each organization had somewhat different principles despite their connection through the network, there was relatively weak emotional intensity involved in the ties between network organizations.

### 3.1.3. *Intimacy*

What about intimacy (i.e., mutual confiding)? Here, the degree of information sharing will be used as a metric of intimacy. In relationships with high intimacy, more information is shared; in relationships with low intimacy, information is rarely shared. Ethnographic research has clarified that close ties are created between staff members, children, and youths in alternative school organizations (Asakura 1995, Sagawa 2010). However, in relationships that span different organizations, there are limits to the degree to which information can be shared. Staff member Mr. U of free school F commented on times when his school cooperated with other institutions for joint baseball practice, saying that, "On those days, when we play baseball together, we'll share information if there's some sort of potential danger—it's really rare, but we'll share information if there are concerns about a child's health or something" (Interview with Mr. U, 10/29/2013). As Mr. U stated, minimum information is shared and they "disclose as little as possible" regarding the personal information of children (Interview with Mr. U, 10/29/2013). There is limited sharing between organizations compared to the amount information shared within organizations. The limits placed on the sharing of children's information between organizations was cited by almost half of all interview subjects. In regard to these limits, intimacy between alternative school organizations is lower than it is within organizations.

### 3.1.4. *Reciprocal services*

"Reciprocal services" was measured as the extent to which the staff members of each alternative school provided assistance in network activities. If assistance was provided for these activities, then reciprocal services were considered high; if little assistance was provided, then this metric was considered low. Regarding the provision of assistance for network activities, Mr. I from free school N stated that, "For example, if only 10% of what my free school wants to do is achieved, then that selfless devotion is all for naught" (Interview with Mr. I, 10/18/2013). If member organizations do not achieve their own goals, then interview subjects claim that network activity assistance is useless. Three interview subjects mentioned this viewpoint (while not a large number, it is not difficult to imagine that member organizations would devote more effort to furthering their own goals rather than those of other institutions). Member institutions focused their efforts on activities within their own organizations rather than on network activities. Therefore, the extent to which member organizations provided assistance with network activities was low compared to activities within their own organizations.

The above paragraphs analyzed the strength of the alternative school network ties using the four elements defined by Granovetter. Each element indicated that the ties between member



organizations was relatively weak compared with those within organizations. In other words, ties do exist between network organizations, but these ties are weak. Members ultimately act as separate organizations. In addition, the ties within organizations are formed from specific cooperative activities that hinge on children (e.g., children's activities and visits), and are therefore extremely "loose."

### *3.2. Shared rules without a formalized overriding principle*

Next, we identify the rules shared between members of the alternative school network.

Activities in the Free! School Ring network are held on the premise that they connect several different organizations and cannot resolve to a single principle (each organization has different principles and it is difficult to identify principles shared by member organizations). Mr. M, a board vice chairman at his school, said (10/12/2013), "well, even if we share principles, I don't think it's very fruitful—I mean, everyone has their own principles, and they end up clashing, I think." Mr. M expressed that it was difficult for multiple organizations to share a single ideal.

However, in Free! School Ring activities, the formation of a single overriding principle was intentionally avoided not just for negative reasons (e.g., the inability to share ideals), but also for positive reasons (e.g., the preservation of member diversity). One organizer, Mr. O, said, "if Free! School Ring goes in one direction or something, there's inevitably going to be someone who says, 'well, I'm opposed to that!,' since there are so many different people from so many different organizations" (Interview with Mr. O, 10/12/2013). Naming a single ideal for the network would tend to eliminate or homogenize this diversity. Therefore, proactively denying the formal establishment of a single overriding principle is a strategic maneuver designed to allow the various member organizations to connect without feeling the need to conform to a given principle. Mr. O said that, "We understood right from the start that everyone was clearly different, so the first thing we thought of was to avoid saying, 'well, this is the correct way'" (Interview with Mr. O, 10/12/2013). In addition, interview subject Mr. M said, "I know we're supposed to respect the things that the organizations or staff members in each place think are good, but if I go in with the attitude that what my place does is absolutely right, and I say, 'everyone else who does something different is wrong,' then there's going to be a fight" (Interview with Mr. M, 10/10/2013). Mr. M emphasized that sharing a single overriding ideal should be avoided.

An alternative school network created from numerous different organizations cannot be dedicated to a single ideal. An approach in which a single overriding principle is deliberately not established so that activities may span a number of different organizations is thus the rule shared by the alternative school network.

### *3.3. An emphasis on utilitarian functions*

The alternative school network is formed by a variety of organizations. It is therefore highly heterogeneous. A highly-heterogeneous network prizes utilitarian functions in which information

and resources are shared to expand the scope of each organization's activities over expressive functions such as the voicing of complaints and concerns between members in similar circumstances (Lin 2002). Examples of utilitarian functions include interaction through children's and youth activities and learning, staff training and interactions, and the sharing of information, tools, and institutional resources needed for operation.

In regard to the incentive for holding network activities, Mr. M said, "our viewpoint is that if we don't cooperate, this industry itself will never get stronger, so we want to participate in network activities!" (Interview with Mr. M, 8/22/2013). Mr. M said that the focus was on strengthening the network (in other words, on the execution of utilitarian functions). Interview subject Mr. Y, one of the directors, expressed the idea regarding network functions as one in which "the network is a place where a number of different constructive conversations can be held, a place where we do something, everyone gets on board, and we get help with things we couldn't do individually, that kind of place" (Interview with Mr. Y, 9/24/2013).

It could be said that emphasizing utilitarian functions over expressive functions between members is a characteristic of a highly-heterogeneous networks containing a variety of different member organizations.

#### **4. A critical, thoughtful debate process**

Interaction in networks formed by a multitude of diverse organizations is manifested by spaces for discussion and debate formed via multiple different public spheres. This debate space is a platform on which the criticism of and reflection upon existing consensus occurs. As these debates are held and criticism and reflection are offered, the alternative schools that belong to the network repeatedly form temporary compromises and continuously hold activities. Below, we identify examples of the interaction experienced by the network and its members within the scope of these debates.

##### *4.1. Awareness and manifestation of differences*

First, we analyze the scope of debate in which differences in principles and ideals between organizations are acknowledged and compromises are formed when these differences manifest.

When members of an alternative school that has joined Free! School Ring cooperates and engages in network activities while discussing the activities held at their own organizations, they do so by emphasizing how their organization differs from other organizations. For example, interview subject Ms. F, a principal at alternative school O, said that her own organization was a school that conducted activities based on alternative educational ideals that differed from existing school education and did not target truant students (Interview with Ms. F, 11/19/2013). However, interview subject Ms. N, a representative from free school L (which does target truant students), said that her school differed from institutions that acted in the name of educational

ideals and put their organizations before the welfare of the children (Interview with Ms. N, 9/7/2013). The members of the network are aware of the differences between their institutions, yet work with each other through the network, compromise on the principles involved in those activities, and work in concert.

The differences between organizations surface through these activities. For example, when a decision was made regarding the network name, Mr. O said that it took almost half a year to decide on “Free! School Ring” (Interview with Mr. O, 4/11/2013). A particular sticking point during the debate at that time was the exclamation point in the title.

*Mr. U said I don't like without “!” because it makes it sounds like a group of free schools. Maybe he wanted to practice a democratic school... He refused because naming “Free Schooling” caused avoidance of entry of not free school people (Mr. O, 12/10/2013).*

Naming the network made difference of values and criterion between organizations clear. Reflection was occurred and constructed a compromise. This process should cultivate the network.

Alternative schools construct a compromise even though they are conscious of differences. We are able to find the process of deliberation doing interaction between plural public spheres.

#### *4.2. Reconciling with a dissimilar “other”*

Next, we look at the debate process that takes place when an attempt is made to reconcile the network with a new, distinctly different party.

Free! School Ring links diverse institutions. However, to preserve each member's autonomy as an NPO, the network took a form through its bylaws that eliminated (as a general rule) institutions defined as schools, incorporated educational institutions, or preparatory schools under Article 1 of Japan's School Education Act.

However, the possibility of an organization joining the network is not flatly determined by the institution's form of incorporation. Rather, it is determined via dialogue between current network member organizations and the applicant organization. The bylaws of Free! School Ring say that the final determination on whether an organization may join the network is made by the directors. Mr. Y, one of the directors, stated that such decisions were based on whether cooperation with the applicant organization was capable of producing activities that would benefit the children (Interview with Mr. Y, 9/24/2013).

For example, the following exchange took place at a network meeting that occurred at a time in which a certain alternative school began to make contact with Free! School Ring activities. At that time, the members of Free! School Ring determined not to add this alternative school right away, but to first establish a mutual relationship of trust with this school through interactions between staff members (Author Field Notes, 9/7/2013). The question of whether this new

alternative school should have joined the network was settled after a debate at a network meeting, whereupon a decision was carefully made.

An especially large and critical debate took place when a support school applied to join the network. A support school was a private institution that offered support to students of a correspondence high school in obtaining diplomas. Therefore, there was an inclination to treat the applicant as a support arm of an existing school engaging in profit-seeking activities, and therefore the possibility was criticized. Below, we analyze the processes of interaction that took place when support school K applied to join the network.

When support school K requested admission to Free! School Ring, voices of opposition burst forth from across the network, as follows:

*A little bit of arguing took place when Mr. T from support school K entered the network, and a certain person said, "Aren't you a 'support' school?" ... And someone said, "Well, maybe you should try coming to a meeting." (Interview with Mr. O, 10/12/2013)*

When support school K asked to join the network, some network members objected, citing that the institution was a "support school." However, Mr. I, who at the time was coordinating affairs for Free! School Ring, did not unilaterally reject the institution, but asked Mr. T as the representative of support school K to attend a meeting, thus setting up an opportunity for dialogue. At this dialogue, a comparison was held to see whether the support school and network members could cooperate with one another. At the time, Mr. Y, who participated in this meeting, had a discussion with Mr. T as follows:

*I was straightforward with Mr. T, asking him, "Isn't the correspondence high school with which you're affiliated a for-profit school?," "What other ties does this school have?," "Mr. T, how exactly did you go about founding this support school, anyway?" (Interview with Mr. Y, 9/24/2013)*

Mr. T took this opportunity to explain his thoughts regarding his own actions and the details of his actions up to that point. As a result, as Mr. T explained by saying, "Well, I guess I was able to get everyone to understand that I wasn't such a bad guy after all, was I?" (Interview with Mr. T, 11/12/2013)

In the process by which the network grew to host activities that included a diverse array of members, applicants are screened to preserve their autonomy as NPOs. However, the process is not one of unilateral rejection, but instead establishes an opportunity for dialogue. The bylaws that would unilaterally reject a support school were questioned when the opportunity arose to confront and reconcile with a new outside party. A new consensus was reached through inter-organizational dialogue.

This chain of interactions could be termed a process of debate through which the existing consensus regarding the categorization of valid potential members of the network was thoughtfully and continually questioned and compromises were formed.

#### *4.3. Revising and redefining the rules*

Finally, we discuss how a revision of the activity rules was demanded in addition to the process by a debate was held when they were redefined.

Free! School Ring's activity rules are based upon its bylaws. Decisions regarding activities and operations are made in accordance with these bylaws, but the bylaws have not been consistently enforced since beginning network activities. Up until now, they are reviewed and revised as they apply to activities.

For a specific example, let's look at the process involved in revising the network's system of membership fees. Free! School Ring's network bylaws were established in September 2004<sup>4)</sup>. The initial bylaws did not stipulate initiation fees or annual fees for network member organizations. A voluntary annual contribution of 2,000 yen was sought from member organizations as a membership fee.<sup>5)</sup> Therefore, though there was a period in which the number of member organizations exceeded 30<sup>6)</sup>, many organizations were members "in name only," and "who was paying their membership fees and who wasn't was vague" (Ms. H, 8/23/2013).

In response to these conditions, some in the network called for a revision of the bylaws. Many opinions were offered, such as "let's have only the institutions that are passionate about participating in our group and expel those participating in name only" (Interview with Mr. M, 8/22/2013) and "we need to have a firm accounting of who's paid the membership fees and who hasn't and establish a proper executive office" (Interview with Ms. H, 8/23/2013).

Free! School Ring revised its membership fee system in 2011 in view of these events. Organizations seeking membership were asked to "decide once and for all whether or not they wanted to join, and if they did join, the fee was 2,000 yen per organization" (Interview with Ms. M, 8/22/2013). A redefinition of what it meant to be a member organization was planned. The revision of the membership fee system also prompted a revision of the network activities. Regarding current network activities, Ms. H, one of the current directors, said, "since they've paid their fees, we have to give them a good return on them, and to do that, we have to make our activities fun!" (Interview with Ms. H, 8/23/2013). Ms. H said this prompted the network to provide more benefits to member organizations.

The network bylaws were repeatedly reviewed and redefined regarding not only membership fees, but the network member rules. Let us look at the debate that occurred regarding the possibility of other intermediary support organizations joining the network. Initially, membership

<sup>4)</sup> From the Free! Schooling Executive Committee Rules, September 15, 2004.

<sup>5)</sup> From "About Joining the Free! Schooling Executive Committee."

<sup>6)</sup> From a Free! Schooling flyer printed in October 2007.

in Free! School Ring were limited to organizations active as places of alternative study and learning, but an opportunity arose to discuss possible membership by intermediary educational support organizations (Author's Field Notes, 6/28/2012). As Mr. Y stated, this caused confusion. She said, "if we let all these people in who want to offer intermediary support, then the mission of Free! School Ring itself is going to become blurred" (Interview with Mr. Y, 9/24/2013). A discussion ensued, taking place primarily among the directors. As a result, a new member framework was formed for "cooperative organization."

As demonstrated by these examples, an existing consensus is present in the network in the form of the network rules that govern activities. Revising these rules means questioning the validity of the existing consensus. Revising and redefining the rules is a continuous process of debate. That is, of thoughtfully scrutinizing the network's existing consensus and forming a compromise.

## 5. Conclusion

The above study identified the distinguishing characteristics of an inter-organizational network formed between alternative schools and the processes by which these organizations interacted.

The distinguishing characteristics of the alternative school inter-organizational network can be summarized according to the following three points. First, a multitude of different alternative schools conduct individual, separate activities, but are connected by weak ties. Next, the network is based on a model that does not establish a single overriding principle for the network to allow activities to be held involving a variety of different organizations. Finally, the network is highly heterogeneous and focuses on utilitarian functions in its activities.

By analyzing the interactions that occurred within an inter-organizational network between alternative schools with these distinguishing characteristics, it was possible to grasp the thoughtful and continuous process of debate that took place within the network. The alternative school network experienced thoughtful and continuous processes of debate based on its awareness of the differences between member organizations and its formation of a compromise when these differences were manifested in the debate regarding the network's name. Such compromise also arose when criticism prompted an ensuing dialogue over the prospective admission of a dissimilar outside organization (i.e., a "support school"), the questioning of management customs, and in the subsequent arrival at a new consensus.

From the above, we can see the network has the potential to allow NPOs to create a civil public sphere. That is, in creating and maintaining an open space for debate. First, a network that connects many different organizations through weak ties creates and maintain connections in a form that can overcome the differences between networks. It is evident that a network created through weak ties can create relationships of a certain degree of depth without excluding organizations that conduct activities based on differing ideals and values. In addition, the model

of a network that presupposes the coexistence of a variety of value systems without formally establishing a single overriding principle allows for new relationships to be formed when a new, dissimilar party appears without unilaterally excluding parties or forcing them to conform. The network's emphasis on utilitarian functions allows for criticism to be continually offered on current activities and for compromises to be formed that suit current circumstances through repeated and continuous questioning. In other words, an inter-organizational network is a manifestation of the space for debate that is vital for the creation and maintenance of a civil public sphere.

The data used in this study ultimately represent only a single case study. It is thus important not to generalize these results for use in arguments. However, this study discovered that a network built between diverse organizations can potentially germinate a civil public sphere involving educational NPO activities. In the future, I would like to gather additional examples of the potential networks created for civil public spheres for further reference.

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